



CLEVELAND
CHAMBER
MUSIC
SOCIETY

PROGRAM NOTES

Rosamunde String Quartet

March 15, 2022 – 7:30 p.m.

Plymouth Church, UCC

String Quartet No. 3 in D major, Op. 18, No. 3

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born: Bonn, 1770

Died: Vienna, 1827

Composed: 1798

Beethoven may have placed the D-major work in third place when he published his first six string quartets as his Op. 18, but the present work was actually composed first, and thus marks Beethoven's debut as a quartet composer. In spite of the obvious Haydn and Mozart influences, it is a work of surprising originality. The opening, with its unaccompanied leap of a minor seventh, is like nothing we could find in the older composers' work, and everything that follows is equally unprecedented. Beethoven's ability to develop entire movements from tiny motivic ideas is already in evidence here, as that minor seventh (or its rhythm of even, long-drawn-out whole notes) pervades almost the whole Allegro. The number of keys visited is also greater than usual: tonalities not closely related to the central D major are used freely, resulting in an exciting and utterly unpredictable harmonic plan.

Similar observations can be made of the other movements as well. The second movement is based on a gentle theme proceeding in equal eighth-notes; yet it can

become quite dramatic in the course of its development. The choice of key (B-flat major, a significant distance from D major) foretells more harmonic adventures, which do not fail to occur. The third movement is marked neither Minuet nor Scherzo but simply Allegro. It is closer to a scherzo character since it is not particularly dance-like and abounds in offbeat accents that appear in so many of Beethoven's scherzos. Its first phrase oscillates between major and minor in a most unusual fashion. The tonality eventually settles in D major, only to be displaced by an agitated trio (middle section) in D minor. In an unusual move, Beethoven wrote out the return of the scherzo in full, with large portions placed an octave higher than the first time. The vivacious finale again unfolds from a single rhythmic idea (that of a swift eighth-note motion in 6/8 time) with occasional interruptions and other surprises. The ending is probably the only point where Beethoven clearly follows Haydn's lead. The way he turns the first three notes of the theme into a *pianissimo* ending is an obvious bow to the older master.

String Quartet, Op. 11

Samuel Barber

Born: West Chester, PA, 1910

Died: New York, 1981

Composed: 1936/43

Barber's *Adagio for Strings* became famous in the orchestral version introduced to the music world by Arturo Toscanini in 1938. Yet this classical elegy was first conceived for string quartet, and to hear it in its original context, surrounded by music that utterly contrasts with its noble calm, is to get a measure of the range of emotions that Samuel Barber could muster as a young composer still in his twenties.

Barber had been "discovered" even before his graduation from the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. His talents were rewarded by a fellowship at the American Academy in Rome, where he was in residence during 1936/37, and where he began work on his String Quartet. His friends of the Curtis String Quartet were planning a European tour and Barber wanted them to perform his new work. These plans fell through, though, and the quartet was performed by the Pro Arte Quartet instead, on December 14, 1936. Barber, however, was dissatisfied with the work and withdrew it for revision. He went through several versions for the last movement and discarded an entire finale he had written. It wasn't until 1943 that he found a solution he

deemed worthy of publication. This solution, surprisingly, did away with an entire movement, and ended with an abridged and modified recapitulation of the first movement, which followed the *Adagio* without pause. In its final form, then, the quartet technically consists of two movements only.

The first of these movements, *Molto allegro e appassionato*, opens with a theme of great dramatic urgency and contains two more major ideas, both of them lyrical and songlike. But the harsh accents are never far from the surface, and the recapitulation of the opening theme, *fortissimo* instead of plain *forte*, erupts with a power that is almost violent. The music winds down and ends in the same *pianissimo* in which the *Adagio* (actually, marked *Molto adagio* here) is about to begin. Here Barber made an extremely simple melody, moving in equal quarter-notes, soar to great heights of expression. The melody grows gradually from the delicate opening to a passionate climax and back again to a whispered *pianissimo*. After this, the turbulent music of the first movement returns, ending the work on an emotional high point.

String Quartet in A minor, D. 804

Franz Schubert

Born: Himmelpfortgrund, nr. Vienna [now part of the city], 1797

Died: Vienna, 1828

Composed: 1824

During his teenage years, Schubert wrote more than a dozen string quartets that he played with his father and his brothers. After leaving the family home, the quartet sessions stopped, and so did the production of string quartets. By the time Schubert returned to quartet writing, it was with very different ambitions: he now aimed for nothing less than publication and professional performances.

Vienna was the first city to have public

string-quartet concerts, thanks to an outstanding violinist named Ignaz Schuppanzigh (1776-1830), whose group premiered Beethoven's Op. 59 and several of the late quartets as well. After several years abroad, Schuppanzigh returned to Vienna in 1823, and this no doubt provided a major impetus for Schubert to resume writing quartets.

The Schuppanzigh Quartet presented the A-minor Quartet on March 14, 1824 at the

Society of the Friends of Music (*Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde*)—by far the most prestigious venue for a work by Schubert up to that point. Soon afterwards, the publisher Sauer & Leidesdorf printed the quartet with a dedication to Schuppanzigh. It was supposed to be the first quartet in a series of three. Schubert did compose a second work but failed to repeat the success of the A minor. That work (*Death and the Maiden*) was rejected by Schuppanzigh and was never published during Schubert's lifetime. The third quartet, the masterpiece in G that remained Schubert's last work in the genre, was not written until three years later, and did not become known to the world until much later.

Schubert reached the summit of his art during these, the final years of his tragically short life. Yet physically and emotionally he was not well. He was suffering from syphilis, the first unmistakable signs of which appeared in 1823. He was subject to bouts of depression and, in a famous letter to a friend dated March 31, 1824 (seventeen days after the premiere of the A minor quartet), he quoted from Goethe's *Gretchen at the Spinning-Wheel* which he had set to music so brilliantly ten years earlier: "My peace is gone, my heart is sore, I shall find peace never and nevermore...". Is it a coincidence that the accompaniment figure played by the second violin at the opening of the quartet is almost identical to the motif of the spinning wheel (albeit in slower motion)?

The first violin's melody, however, is new, and so is the astonishing development to which it, and the other themes, are subjected in this poignant "Allegro ma non troppo." In this movement, a deep sadness is periodically relieved by beautiful dreams, and the tension erupts in powerful, if brief, dramatic outbursts. Schubert ties all these emotional extremes together by the constant use of a simple descending triad that becomes capable of expressing widely divergent states of mind.

The second movement uses a famous

melody from *Rosamunde*, the incidental music Schubert had written to a soon-to-be-forgotten play by Helmine von Chézy, performed twice at the Theater an der Wien in December 1823. This melody, which combines quiet serenity with deep nostalgia, alternates with a "B" section whose syncopations and off-beat accents contradict the imperturbable flow of the main melody. The second time around, this same melody suddenly changes character and becomes intensely dramatic, with bold modulations and agitated rhythmic figures, before the idyll returns at the end.

The third-movement minuet includes another self-quote, this time from the 1819 song *Die Götter Griechenlands* ("The Gods of Greece") after a poem by Friedrich Schiller. The opening line of the poem: *Schöne Welt, wo bist du?* ("Fair world, where are you?") struck a deep chord with Schubert: despite the presence of minuet rhythm, the dance character is attenuated by the long pedal notes of the cello and by the stubborn repeats of the *Schöne Welt* quote. The Trio section is launched by a variant of the same motif, but then it takes a different turn and brings some relief with a strain recalling a folk dance. Even here, however, the music remains more subdued than in other dance movements.

Touches of sadness remain even in the last movement that would be expected to resolve all the tensions. The ostensibly light-hearted rondo includes a wistful *ritardando* (slowing down) in the middle of its main theme and, although the main key is A major, the minor mode is never too far away. The prevailing dynamic markings are *piano* and *pianissimo*, with only a few, brief *forte* moments. Even the ending is quiet and subdued, except for the very last pair of chords; but Schubert weakens the effect of those by using an inverted penultimate chord that makes the ending noticeably less conclusive.

-Peter Laki

Mr. Laki is a musicologist and Visiting Associate Professor of Music at Bard College. He has been the annotator for the Society's program booklet since 2012, having previously served as annotator for the Cleveland Orchestra from 1990 to 2007. He is a native of Budapest and holds a Ph.D. in music from the University of Pennsylvania.